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STATE FOR OES/SCI M. O'MARA, OES/PCI P. HUDAK
EPA FOR OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, B. FREEMAN

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN FACES ANOTHER POTENTIAL WATER CRISIS

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11. (SBU) Summary: As a country short on water, Kazakhstan relies heavily on the resources of the Ili-Balkhash Basin, particularly the Ili River and Lake Balkhash. Mismanagement, abuse, and increased water use by neighboring China all now threaten the Basin's long-term sustainability. The problem is particularly acute at Lake Balkhash, an already fragile ecosystem at risk if water use practices remain unchanged. The GOK is increasingly focused on protecting its water resources but is hampered by a shortage of technical experts and a strained relationship with China on water issues. End summary

The Ili-Balkhash Basin: Kazakhstan's Fertile Center

12. (U) The Ili-Balkhash Basin, which encompasses parts of the Zhambyl, East Kazakhstan, and Almaty Oblasts as well as China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, occupies 13% of Kazakhstan's total territory (353,000 square kilometers) and has a population of 3.2 million people. Lake Balkhash and the Ili River form the heart of the basin. Lake Balkhash, the second largest lake in Central Asia and the third largest in Eurasia, has a length of 600 kilometers, a width varying from 5 to 70 kilometers, and a total surface area of 16,000 km². The lake is freshwater in its western section, salt water in its eastern section. The Ili River originates in China before stretching through Kazakhstan for 815 kilometers. The river provides Lake Balkhash with 80% of its water.

13. (U) The basin's wealth of water resources and favorable climatic conditions make it one of the most fertile areas in Kazakhstan. The basin contains 45,000 rivers, temporary currents, and gullies with a total length of 118,000 kilometers and another 24,000 lakes and man made reservoirs. The total area of agriculture lands is 8.18 million hectares, including 6.53 million hectares of natural grazing pastures. The basin is home to over 50 species of mammals and 120 species of birds.

The Domestic Threat

4.(U) Misuse, overuse, and abuse of Lake Balkhash and the Ili River threaten the long-term sustainability of the Ili-Balkhash basin. The lake's ecosystem is fragile because it is extremely shallow, with an average depth of only 5.8 meters. Intensive economic activity in southeastern Kazakhstan has led to increased water consumption. Watersystems that drain into nearby farms consume twice the

water that similar sized European and American operations require. As a result water levels have decreased, and coastal areas have degraded. The surface area of the lake was reduced from 21,400 square kilometers in 1961 to 17,000 square kilometers in 1999. From 1972 to 2001, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Division of Early Warning and Assessment, the southern part of the lake's surface decreased by approximately 150 sq kilometers.

15. (U) Pollution has also done serious harm to the Ili-Balkhash ecosystem. The Balkhash mining and smelting plant (Balkhashtvetmet), which sits on the shores of Lake Balkhash, pollutes the lake with heavy metal and sulfites, according to UNEP. Bagban Taimbetov, the Karaganda region's deputy state prosecutor, told the Kazakhstani media in 2006 that 1800 tons of dust discarded by Balkhashtsvetmet settles on the surface of the lake annually, including 140 tons of copper, 120 tons of lead, and 135 tons of zinc. As many as 600 tons of heavy metals and harmful microelements dissolve in the water and settle to the bottom. He also reported that in the tissues of fish caught in Balkhash, chrome content has increased 13 times, zinc 11 times, and nickel doubled over the last ten years. Bulat Bekniyazov, Ministry of Environment Department of Environmental Problems, Sciences and Monitoring, told ESToff that fish production in Balkhash has decreased by 40 million tons since the 1960s.

The External Threat

16. (SBU) Western China,s growing thirst for water also threatens the Ili-Balkhash Basin. With a booming economy and a growing population, western China,s water needs are almost certain to keep growing. According to public reports, China

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intends to divert more water from the Ili to develop its oil industry. Anatoliy Ryabtsev, Chairman of Kazakhstan's Committee on Water Resources, told ESToff that Kazakhstan has information that China has started to build a new water use facility for the Ili. Ryabtsev also informed ESToff that China has admitted that the country,s industrial growth is surpassing its ability to prevent the Ili,s pollution (reftel).

17. (SBU) Kazakhstan lacks data, however, on China,s use of the Ili. Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Water Resources Mukhtar Zhakenov told ESToff in May that the information Kazakhstan possesses is dated, making it impossible to predict China,s future use. In a March meeting, the Ministry of Environment,s Bulat Bekniyazov reported to ESToff that they have no official information from China as to whether they are using more water. He did note, however, that Kazakhstani officials visiting China have noticed an increased number of water facilities on the Ili.

18. (U) In March, Kazakhstan hosted a meeting on Ili-Balkhash Basin integrated management attended by representatives from Kyrgyzstan and China. The parties agreed to support development and introduction of an integrated management plan for the Ili-Balkhash Basin. They also recommended finalizing a draft agreement by the end of the year on integrated basin management.

19. (SBU) Talks broke down, however, when China rejected Kazakhstan,s offer to send China large stocks of free or heavily subsidized food for 10 years in exchange for a commitment from China to allow an unimpeded flow of river water into Lake Balkhash. According to Bekniyazov, who attended the meeting, the Chinese refused to provide details on their use of the Ili River. The Chinese also argued that Kazakhstan already has ample water resources, said Bekniyazov.

A Visit to Balkhash

110. (U) In early June, ESToff, Acting EST Hub Officer and

Embassy Tashkent Scientific Affairs Specialist traveled to Balkhash, a city of 74,000 on the shores of Lake Balkhash. Upon approaching Balkhash, the first noticeable sight was the tremendous cloud of smoke emanating from Balkhashtsvetmet, giving Balkhash the look of a U.S. steel city in years past.

¶11. (U) City Akim Kazhymurat Tokushev told ESToff that Lake Balkhash is healthy, and that no industry in Balkhash creates serious pollution. A representative from Balkhashsvetmet present at the meeting with the Akim stated that the firm has never been fined for environmental pollution. He added that Balkhashsvetmet plans to introduce cleaner technologies at its plant, although he could not give a fixed date for the introduction of the technology. The Akim also emphasized the importance of Balkhashsvetmet for the city; the plant employees 12,000 people.

¶12. (U) While in Balkhash, ESToff also met with NGO representatives Iskander Mirkhashimov of the Regional Environmental Center for Central Asia and Sayatbek Beysembekov of the Balkhash Environmental Center. Both agreed that the greatest threat facing Lake Balkhash is water loss. If the lake decreases 1 to 1.5 meters from current water levels, they said, the results will be catastrophic for Lake Balkhash and the region. According to Mirkhashimov, as the lake bed increases, the salinity of the entire lake will increase, and more salt and dust will be blown by wind across the Ili-Balkhash region, leading to the melting of glaciers, drought, and desertification. The Ministry of Environment's Bekniyazov delivered a similar message to ESToff in an earlier meeting, saying that a small decrease in Balkhash water levels could lead to many of the same problems witnessed at the Aral Sea.

¶13. (U) Focusing on China, Mirkhashimov reiterated that Kazakhstan lacks sufficient data on China's water use. One solution, he suggested, would be to place measuring posts on the Chinese border, but he questioned whether Kazakhstan would have the personnel to man the posts. He added that Kazakhstan should not make China the scapegoat for all of Balkhash's problems. Kazakhstan has created many environmental programs, he said, but has struggled to

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implement them because of a lack of human resources. He noted that the Ministry of Agriculture's Committee on Water Resources only has several working level-experts who are overstretched because of Kazakhstan's many water problems.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: Kazakhstan must improve its water management practices and reach an understanding with China on water-sharing if it is to ensure the sustainability of Lake Balkhash and the Ili-Basin. The U.S. can play a role as Kazakhstan searches for solutions. Post intends to send three Kazakhstani water experts to the U.S. as part of the International Visitors Program. Further interaction with U.S. water experts will be appreciated by Kazakhstan as it attempts to deepen its own pool of experts and may help Kazakhstan to avoid an environmental crisis. End comment.
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